



## Special day celebrates transition from foster care to adoption

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**By Sarah Kellogg  
Washington Bureau**

WASHINGTON - Tomorrow judges in 34 Michigan counties will confirm for hundreds of Michigan children what they have known in their hearts for months if not years -- at last, they have a permanent home.

Tuesday's statewide effort, known as Michigan Adoption Day, will take between 255 and 265 children out of the state foster care system and place them with adoptive families.

"I'm Irish and one of the things we always said as an expression in my family was 'safe home,'" said Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Maura Corrigan, who is overseeing Michigan's Adoption Day efforts.

"We would say it when people were leaving the house to return home. We would say it at funerals. After 9-11, I would say it as a little prayer. That's a good way to describe what the goal is here. We're attempting to find a safe, permanent home for children."

Michigan Adoption Day piggybacks on National Adoption Day, an initiative that began in 2000 and is designed to draw attention to the plight of the more than 126,000 U.S. children languishing in foster care -- some for many years. National officials hope to see 3,000 children adopted during the campaign.

About 4,450 Michigan children in foster care are waiting to be adopted, according to the state. For most, an adoptive family - usually their foster care family or relatives - has been identified. But there are still 400 kids still looking for homes. All the children available for adoption are considered permanent state wards who cannot be returned to their birth parents.

"I think there are more challenges in adopting children from foster care," said Maureen Sorbet, a spokeswoman for the Family Independence Agency, which runs the state's foster care system. "If we have sibling groups, we want them adopted together. We have older children. We have special needs children who

can either be medically fragile or emotionally or physically abused."

There have been adoption horror stories. Occasionally, a newspaper uncovers a story about violent and dangerous teens or a birth parent who decides to reverse his or her termination of parental rights. While they happen, those events are rare.

"The reasons these children are put into foster care can be pretty traumatic," said Rose Homa, a spokeswoman for the Michigan Federation For Children and Families, which represents private adoption agencies. "It is a concern to be dealt with, but no one should go into adoption without realizing there will be challenges."

And those challenges aren't just with kids coming out of foster care. International, direct consent and voluntary adoptions can be difficult as well. Experts say adoptive children have emotional troubles whether they've been raised in an orphanage in the Ukraine or taken from an abusive home in Kalamazoo.

"Adoptive families have additional issues, of course," said Janice Fonger, executive director of the Adoption Family Support Network in Kent County, which helps families after they've adopted children. "They need to deal with issues that birth families don't need to deal with. But adoption is wonderful. It works. It takes a lot of work to make it work, but it works."

Kent County will hold its own adoption day on Dec. 17. It's expected to finalize as many as 75 adoptions that day.

In 2000, the last year that statewide data is available, there were about 4,000 adoptions in Michigan. Of that total, 3,000 of those adoptions were of children in foster care. Another 588 were adoptions of children from foreign countries, and 388 were voluntary-release adoptions where the birth parent gives a child to an agency. About 160 adoptions were direct consent placements where a child is given by a birth parent to a specific family.

The good news, experts say, is Michigan's foster care rolls have been whittled down in recent years. Changes in state and federal rules sped up the process for terminating parental rights and eliminated some of the red tape. Michigan foster-care adoptions increased from 1,959 in 1993 to 2,927 in 2002.

"We've made a number of changes over the years to ensure that foster care is only a temporary setting," said U.S. Rep. Dave Camp, R-Midland. "That's why Adoption Day is so important. It lets families know about the option of adoption, and it helps us recruit new families into the foster care system."

Advocates say the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE) has helped get the word out as well in recent years. The MARE Web site -- [www.mare.org](http://www.mare.org) -- gives interested families a chance to see photos of children in foster care who can be adopted.

"The important thing to remember," said Corrigan, "is that a child is waiting, and we don't want keep that child waiting too long."

List of participating counties in Michigan and number of adoptions planned:

Allegan, 2

Alpena, 5

Antrim, 4

Bay, 3

Calhoun, 15

Cass, 4

Cheboygan, 2

Chippewa, 1

Delta, 1

Emmet, 9

Genesee, 5

Grand Traverse, 13

Hillsdale, 3

Ingham, 2

Ionia, 6

Isabella, 1

Jackson, 15

Kalamazoo, 11

Kalkaska, 2

Lenawee, 2

Livingston, 12

Macomb, 9

Midland, 7

Monroe, 15

Newaygo, 8

Oakland, 16

Ottawa, 6

Saginaw, 7

St. Clair, 16

St. Joseph, 6

Tuscola, 5

Washtenaw, 31

Wayne, 14-15

Source: Family Independence Agency

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